

# Jerusalem Perspective

A Monthly Report on Research into the Words of Jesus

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## Naming John the Baptist

by Shmuel Safrai

...and she [Elizabeth] gave birth to a son.... On the eighth day when they came to circumcise the child they were going to name him after his father, but his mother interrupted, "No, his name will be John." They said to her, "None of your relatives has that name." Then they made signs to his father to find out what he wished to name him. He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, "His name is John." (Luke 1:57-63)

*This is the fourth of a series of articles examining the Lukan account of John the Baptist and Jesus in the light of Jewish literature.*

entered into the covenant of circumcision, may he also enter into the Torah, the marriage canopy, and into good deeds.

Apparently this prayer is quite ancient since part of it is found in the Samaritan ritual as well.

### Earliest Reference

Nevertheless, the first reference in Jewish literature to the custom of naming a child at his circumcision is found in Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer, a late rabbinic work from the beginning of the seventh century C.E.:

The parents of Moses saw that his appearance was like that of an angel of God. They circumcised him on the eighth day and called him Yekutiel. (Chapter 48)

Yekutiel, a compound of *yekuti*, apparently from the root *np'* (to obey), and the word for God (*el*), means "obedient to God."

Yekutiel is found in I Chronicles 4:18, and according to both the midrash (rabbinic homilies on the Bible) and targum (Aramaic translations of Scripture) of this verse, it refers to Moses. He was named Yekutiel because he looked like an angel, an obedient servant of God.

### Reading the Torah

There is another instance in which the Gospel of Luke documents a Jewish practice before it appears in Jewish literature. Many early Jewish sources mention that the Torah was read in the synagogue on the Sabbath. None of them, however, mentions that a portion of the Prophets was read after the reading of the Torah. The Mishnah does mention the reading of the Torah and the Prophets, but does not attribute it specifically to the Second Temple period:

He who reads from the Torah may not read less than three verses... [in reading] from the Prophets...." (Megillah 4:4)

The Jewish custom was, and still is, to read the Torah and the Prophets on the Sabbath in the synagogue. Seven men each read a portion of a designated passage from the Torah, the seventh reading a shorter passage than the others and then a passage from the Prophets.

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**T**he naming of a child at his circumcision ceremony, as presented in Luke 1, is also mentioned in Luke 2:21 regarding the naming of Jesus. In fact, naming a child during the circumcision ceremony is still accepted Jewish practice. The naming rite includes a prayer for the child's well-being:

May this little one, [the child's name], be great. Just as he has

## The Synoptic Problem

### Gospel Similarities

by Robert L. Lindsey

*This is the fifth article in Dr. Lindsey's introduction to the field of synoptic studies and the "synoptic problem." Last month we introduced the basic synoptic concepts and terminology. We continue by examining some of the evidence which must be taken into account in finding a solution to the "synoptic problem."*

**N**one of the synoptic Gospels mentions the name of its author, and the tradition that Matthew wrote the first Gospel, Mark the second and Luke the third

dates from the late second century. Most modern Gospel scholars have assumed that the first account written was Mark. However, I believe there is evidence to suggest a different conclusion.

### Similarity in Wording

Approximately two-thirds of the synoptic Gospels' 225 story-units or pericopae are found in more than

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It is the greater honor to be asked to read last.

The tradition about which passages from the Prophets were to be read and in what order apparently was still very fluid in the time of Jesus. Unlike when reading the Torah publicly, when reading the Prophets one could combine various passages and even insert one's own comments — in short, develop a sermon while reading the portion from the Prophets.

Based on rabbinic sources alone, it would be impossible to determine that a portion of the Prophets was indeed read in the synagogue after the reading of the Torah. Luke 4:16-17, however, states that Jesus arrived at the synagogue in Nazareth on the Sabbath, read from the Torah and afterwards read a portion from a scroll of the Prophet Isaiah. Thus, Luke clearly indicates that as early as the first century C.E. a portion of the Prophets was read in the synagogue after the reading of the Torah.

It may not be immediately clear to many Christian readers that the story of Jesus' visit to the synagogue in Luke 4:16-17 refers to reading from the Torah. However, the two Greek words translated "he stood up to read" strongly suggest that Jesus had read a portion from the Torah before reading from the scroll of Isaiah. One does not stand up in order to read the Prophets. Even the

last of the seven readers does not stand up to read the Prophets, but stands up to read the Torah and goes on to read from the Prophets.

## Father's Namesake

Luke notes that the neighbors and relatives of Zechariah and Elizabeth wished to call the baby Zechariah after his father. According to Jewish tradition today, a child is not named after his father unless the father is no longer living. However, during the first centuries C.E. this apparently was not the case, and there are a number of recorded instances in which a child was named after his father while he was still alive.

One such instance is found in Tosefta Niddah 5:15, where Rabbi Hananiah son of Hananiah is mentioned. Both father and son appear together before Rabban Gamaliel. Another example is that of Ananus son of Ananus, the Sadducean high priest. According to Josephus, Ananus the younger "convened the judges of the Sanhedrin and brought before them James, the brother of Jesus who is called the Christ, and certain others. He accused them of having transgressed the Torah and delivered them up to be stoned" (*Antiquities* 20:200). Ananus' father, the Annas of the New Testament, was still alive at the time.

Ultimately it was the parents' prerogative to select a name for their child, as the following tradition indicates:

A man is given three names: the one given him by his father and mother, the one given him by other people [his nickname], and the one which Heaven predestines for him. (*Ecclesiastes Rabbah* 7:3)

It is possible that this midrash on Ecclesiastes is reflected in the naming of John, where one finds reference to the parents, the people, and the angel or Heaven each giving a name to the child.

## Communal Participation

It was common for neighbors and relatives to take part in the week-long festivities which preceded the naming of a child. Tannaitic

tradition (pre-230 C.E.) mentions such gatherings taking place each evening at the parents' home during the week following the birth of either son or daughter, but especially following the birth of a son:

This is what *havurot* [benevolent societies] used to do in Jerusalem — some visited families in mourning, others visited families who were having a wedding feast, and others visited families who were celebrating a birth.... (Tractate Semahot 12:5)

In each of these situations, a family faced a heavy financial burden in providing food and drink for their visiting guests. The *havurot* never came to a home empty-handed, but brought "wine, lentils, oil...."

Another tradition states:

[If there should be a conflict between attending the celebrations following] the birth of a daughter and [those following] the birth of a son — the birth of a son takes precedence. (Mekilta Ahrith d'Avel, ed. Higgin, p. 231)

The traditions regarding the *havurot* of Jerusalem, like other traditions pertaining to customs of the inhabitants of Jerusalem, date from the period before the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E.

## Post-Temple Period

Among the religious decrees that befell Israel after the Temple's destruction or after the Bar-Kochba Revolt (132-135 C.E.), the sages enumerated the following:

It was decreed upon the world which presently is desolate that one should neither marry, have children nor hold the celebrations connected with the birth of a child. (Tosefta Sotah 15:10)

Some sources refer to the various acts of subterfuge undertaken during the period of persecution that followed the Bar-Kochba Revolt in order to announce clandestine celebrations:

The light of a lamp in Beror Hayil — the birth of a child. (Ketubot 25c)

In other words, in Beror Hayil, a village about eight and a half miles southeast of Ashkelon, parents of a newborn baby put a lamp on the window sill as a sign that there had been a birth and that friends and relatives should secretly assemble to celebrate. JP

## Jerusalem Perspective

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Under the *yod* of יִשְׂרָאֵל is a vowel symbol we have not yet learned — a single dot. This vowel is called a *hi-RIK*, and is Hebrew's long "e" sound, pronounced as the "i" in ski.

In English יִשְׂרָאֵל (*yis-ra'EL*) is spelled "Israel" and pronounced IZ-ray'1 or IZ-r'1. The modern English form is derived from the Greek spelling (Ἰσραήλ, *is-ra-EL*), which was the basis of Late Latin, Old and Middle English spellings.

As we explained in Lesson One, because the letter "j" was pronounced as a "y" sound in early English, most biblical names beginning with *yod* are spelled in English with a "j." Having introduced the *hi-RIK*, we now can be more precise: biblical names beginning with *yod* accompanied by any vowel other than *hi-RIK* begin in English with a "j."

There is one partial exception: the name of the prophet יְשַׁעְיָהוּ (*ye-sha'-YAH*), beginning with *yod* plus *she-VA'*, is spelled Isaiah. However, the spelling of every other *ye-sha'-YAH* in the Bible is consistent with the rule. There are several other men with the same name as the prophet, and their names are transliterated Jesaiah or Jeshaiiah (I Chr. 3:21; 25:3,15; 26:25; Ezra 8:7,19; Neh. 11:7).

Biblical names such as Israel which begin with *yod* accompanied by *hi-RIK*, begin in English with "I." There are only a few exceptions, such as יִשְׁשַׁכַּר (*yi-SHAI*, Jesse), יְרֵמְיָהוּ (*yir-me-YAH*, Jeremiah) and יֶתְרוֹ (*yit-RO*, Jethro).

## Long hi-RIK

A *hi-RIK* often appears in a word followed by *yod*. Many grammarians consider such a *hi-RIK* to be a long vowel, and a *hi-RIK* with no *yod* to be a short vowel. Although there is evidence that in ancient times the *hi-RIK* with *yod* was held a little longer than the *hi-RIK* without *yod*, in modern Hebrew no difference is made between the two. In JERUSALEM PERSPECTIVE's transliteration system, both are transcribed *i*.

A *yod* which follows *hi-RIK* is in effect silent, since it does not influ-

# Hebrew Nuggets

ence pronunciation. The idea of a silent *yod* or a *yod* that is somehow connected to the long "e" sound should not be foreign to English speakers. The "y" is sometimes pronounced with a "y" sound as in

Nazareth, Jesus' hometown, is referred to in the Gospels as a "city"; yet in the time of Jesus it was no more than a small village. Assuming a Hebrew background to the Gospels would explain the Gospels' surprising use of "city" to refer to Nazareth.

• יִי (i), "island." Although this word has two letters and a vowel, since both letters are silent we only hear the sound of the *hi-RIK*.

• רִי (re'i), "mirror." As with most biblical words that occur only once, scholars are not certain of the word's exact meaning. If רִי means mirror in Job 37:18, then it seems that in those days a mirror was made from cast metal.

• לֵוִי (le-vi), "Levi; Levite." לֵוִי has four meanings: 1) the third son of Jacob and Leah (Genesis 29:34); 2) the tribe made up of the descendants of Levi, later set apart by God to be the nation's priests (Deut. 10:8); 3) a member of the priestly tribe of Levi (Judges 17:7,9); 4) a Levite of non-Aaronic descent.

Although originally all members of the tribe of Levi were designated priests, a careful distinction later was made between Levites who were descendants of Aaron and those who were not. Only the former were now priests and allowed to offer sacrifices or enter the sanctuary. The latter were simply Levites, and were subordinate to the priests (Numbers 18:1-7; Ezekiel 44:10-16). According to the Mishnah, when the Torah is read publicly in the synagogue, "a *ko-HEN* [priest] should read first, after him a *le-VI* [Levite], and after him a *yis-ra'-EL* [an ordinary Jew]" (Gittin 5:8).

"Levi's" today is almost synonymous with blue denim jeans. This name tells us that the creator of that revolutionary type of clothing was a modern-day Levite.

• שִׁיר (shir), "song; poem." Hebrew, since biblical times, has used the same word for "song" (Psalm 137:4) and "poem" (Song of Songs 1:1). The plural is שִׁירִים (*shi-RIM*).

In our next lesson we encounter another vowel found in יִשְׂרָאֵל, and learn some of the Hebrew names in the Bible.

## Lesson Twenty Israel: hi-RIK

*Israel is the English form of the Hebrew name יִשְׂרָאֵל (yis-ra'-EL). The first letter in the word is י (yod). Remember that in our system of transliteration, yod is transliterated "y."*

*In this lesson we encounter a new Hebrew vowel.*

yard, at other times as a long "e" as in pretty or easy, and at other times it is silent as in key.

## Reading Practice

Now that the *hi-RIK* has been introduced, we can read the following words:

• עִמִּי ('im), "with." Personal suffixes can be attached directly to prepositions: "with me" is 'i-MI; "with us" is 'i-MA-nu. Therefore, "with us [is] God" or "God with us" is the two-word compound 'i-MA-nu 'el, transliterated Immanuel in English versions of the Bible.

• הִיא (hi'), "she." In the reading practice of Lesson Nine we learned the Hebrew word for "he" — הוּא (hu'). Now we also can read the word for "who" — מִי (mi). Those of our American readers who remember the old Abbott and Costello comedy routine, "Who's on First?" may be amused to note a similar possibility of confusion here: in Hebrew מִי (mi) is who, הוּא (hu') is he and הִיא (hi') is she.

• עִיר ('ir), "city." The word means "city" in modern Hebrew, but in ancient Hebrew sources it usually meant village. For instance



### *The Synoptic Problem* (Continued from page 1)

one of the Gospels. This shared material not only is similar in content, but in many instances shows word-for-word agreement. Such literary dependence is too extensive and complex to suppose that the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke are independent accounts of eyewitnesses. The Gospel writers must have based their accounts upon at least one shared, written text.

The writers of Matthew, Mark and Luke were not authors so much as editors, and apparently very little of their texts was composed by them. The similarity of stories and wording among the synoptic Gospels indicates that the writers were editing a shared source or sources, and/or editing each other's work. It is as if three different newspaper editors were editing the same wire service story.

The identification of the non-canonical sources shared by the writers of the synoptic Gospels, and the nature of the Gospels' interdependence, is the heart of what scholars call "the synoptic problem."

### **Similarity in Story Order**

The synoptic Gospels also show similarity by having a common story outline. Most of the seventy-eight pericopae shared by the three Gospels are presented in the same order, from the pericope about the preaching of John the Baptist to the pericope about the empty tomb.

Matthew and Luke inserted other stories into their common outline which have no parallel in Mark. Surprisingly, the forty-seven stories shared by Matthew and Luke which have no parallel in Mark display an almost total lack of agreement on pericope-order.

It was the observation of these

two facts — agreement of pericope-order in Triple Tradition and lack of agreement in Double Tradition — that led early nineteenth-century scholars to accept the theory of Markan Priority. According to this theory, Mark's was the first Gospel to be written and is the document lying behind the Triple Tradition material. The source of the Double Tradition material was thought to be a conjectured, non-canonical document labeled Q.

The reasoning of these pioneering scholars was as follows: Double Tradition pericope-order suggests that Matthew and Luke were writing independently of each other. Yet in Triple Tradition, Matthew and Luke generally agree with Mark's pericope-order, and they never agree together to break with Mark's pericope-order. Therefore Mark must have given Matthew and Luke their Triple Tradition pericope-order, and so his account must have been written before theirs.

By the beginning of this century, almost all New Testament scholars had accepted this approach, and today Markan priority is still the most widely accepted solution to the synoptic problem.

### **Different Interpretation**

However, it is impossible on the basis of pericope-order alone to determine the order in which the synoptic Gospels were written. Facts of pericope-order are important, but they are not sufficient to tell us which Gospel was written first.

One also could interpret the pericope-order evidence as indicating that Mark used one of the other two Gospels, copying only part of that Gospel's pericopae, and then was used as a source by the other Gospel. As in the theory of Markan Priority, Mark would still be viewed as the cause of the common pericope-order in Triple Tradition, but instead of being first in order, Mark would be the second.

*In the next article we will examine other aspects of synoptic interdependence which weaken the case for Markan priority.*

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